Habitat management for

BLACK-TAILED DEER

In the State of Washington

The black-tailed deer (also known as coast or Columbian black-tailed deer), *Odocoileus hemionus columbianus* or *Dama hemionus columbiana*, is distributed throughout western Washington, west of the Cascades' summit. It is closely related to the mule deer that inhabits Washington from the Cascades' summit, eastward.

The black-tailed is a little smaller and darker than the mule deer. Its tail is black up to the rump, whereas only the tip is black on mule deer. Its antlers are shaped like, but smaller than, mule deer's. Adult bucks measure 4-1/2 to 5 feet in length, 3-feet high at the shoulder, and weigh 75 to 225 pounds dressed-weight (averaging 100 to 140 pounds). Does measure nearly 4 feet in length and weigh 60 to 150 pounds dressed-weight (averaging 90 pounds). As with all deer, the buck grows a new set of antlers each year, shedding them in mid-winter. A yearling buck's antlers normally have spikes on each side, but two points are common.

The life-span is about seven years. Mating takes place in late fall (early November). Does give birth to one or two fawns in late spring (May and June, after a gestation period of about 210 days). A doe usually bears its first fawn at age two. The home range of an individual blacktail is surprisingly small, usually less than one mile in diameter. Many spend their entire lives in this small area, but those which summer at high elevations in the mountains retreat to lower areas with the arrival of winter snows.

HABITAT NEEDS

Food. Black-tailed deer feed chiefly on browse. Annually, the tender forage of woody plants constitutes about three-fourths of their diet. In spring and summer, however, the tender green-growth of forbs and grasses may furnish up to half of the food eaten. The more attractive and palatable foods from shrubs, trees, and vines are: The acorns of oak and the buds and leaves of trailing blackberry, cranberry, elder, red huckleberry, vine maple, western redcedar, salmonberry, thimbleberry, and willows. Of poorer quality, but eaten in substantial amounts, are the forage of red alder, bitter cherry, rose, salal, and Scotch-broom--also fruit and buds of apples and pears. Douglas-fir and hemlock, sometimes eaten in early spring, are not important nutritionally throughout the remainder of the year.

Attractive and nutritious forbs are: Agoseris, alfalfa, clovers, deer-vetch, pearly everlasting, fireweed, peavine, strawberry, trefoils, vetch, and yarrow--also a few garden crops such as peas.

The more attractive grasses and grass-like plants which are grazed significantly from January to June include bluegrasses, orchardgrass, Mt. brome, oats, and wheat.

Some species of mushrooms and lichens are choice foods.

Cover. Black-tailed deer use wooded areas for shelter against sun and storms, and to escape hunters and predatory animals. They feed in open areas at night; and along field borders of woodland or brush cover in early evenings and mornings.

Water. Western Washington is well supplied with streams and springs, so drinking water usually is no problem for black-tailed deer.

MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

Black-tailed deer were not abundant in the closed canopy of virgin timber in western Washington when early explorers and settlers came. The deer prospered and increased with clear-cut logging and burning of the slash as grasses, weeds, and shrubs produced good forage within their reach. The deer populations in such areas usually peak in a period of 10 to 15 years after such logging operations, and then decline rapidly as available foods are shaded out.

In many areas, however, agricultural crop fields and pastures (at elevations below 2,000 feet) are intermingled with woodlands and brushlands which combine to maintain good black-tailed populations. Winter losses during extremely severe winters often caused by starvation--take as many as 25 percent of the yearlings and adults, and 50 percent of the fawns, or a total loss of about one-third of the previous fall population.

The food-supply and cover needs are provided by vegetation, its management and use. This habitat may be excellent, good, fair, or poor. Where open woodland and brushy areas exist adequately, the quality of the habitat is governed primarily by the important plants that feed deer well; and, therefore, the landowner who wants deer and deer-hunting should rely on the various plants that are named in the foregoing section about Foods.

Cultivated lands and improved pastures offer opportunities for growing attractive and nutritious foods that support the best populations of black-tailed deer. A few acres of tender winter-green grasses, barley, oats, wheat, alfalfa, clovers, deervetch, trefoils, and vetch are appropriate plants for such fields and pastures. The choice woody plants should be left at the open edges along adjacent woodlands. With these better habitats, black-tailed deer reach larger size and heavier weights than in poor-food locations.

Woodland and forest habitat is often too dense for favorable blacktail living, except during the 15-year span after a clear-cut logging operation. Small openings help where fireweed, native grasses and forbs, and shrubs provide good foods. Slash burning also improves the habitat as does commercial and precommercial thinning.

Hunting. Dense cover limits the hunting season for black-tailed deer and the more successful hunters seek the open hillsides or the recently logged off or burned off areas. Wet, rainy weather will force deer to the more open places and make them easier to hunt. Best hunter success occurs during late or controlled seasons after leaves are off the deciduous trees and animals are more easily seen.

One of the conservation and management objectives is to harvest an adequate number of mature bucks, spike bucks, does, and fawns to avoid overuse of the deer foods, assure good physical condition of the deer, and avoid low rates of annual fawn production. About half of the bucks harvested are two-year olds.

The Soil Conservation Service and Soil and Water Conservation Districts offer competent technical guidance relative to soil, water, and plant management to many landowners (private and public). The Washington Department of Game is responsible for setting the hunting seasons, managing lands under their supervision, and related informational assistance throughout the State.